

Goal of JWA Expansion Debated

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By Jeff Overly

What will a half-billion dollars and change buy Orange County's air travelers?

In light of a nine-figure spike in the cost of an expansion project at John Wayne Airport, many observers are wondering just that.

The aviation hub this year launched a project to add a third terminal, six gates and 2,000 or more parking spaces. Work will cost about \$570 million, up \$135 million from original estimates, officials said last week.

The cost won't hit taxpayers, but the revelation has roused observers who say the new price tag, for better or worse, will justify significant airport traffic increases.

Such a scenario would be politically explosive, as the airport is bound by a legal agreement to limit flights roaring over neighborhoods. Officials say the expansion is intended only to better serve existing passengers and allowable increases in travelers down the road. "It's not our goal to stuff people in there," spokeswoman Jenny Wedge said.

But airport watchers are skeptical. "I don't think there's anyone who could say that's all we're going to do" is expand but not allow more flights, said Jeanne Price of Airfair, a group that seeks restrictions at JWA. "To say otherwise, I think, would be disingenuous."

Similar head-scratching exists among those who support more flights. "I would say that it's unclear as to why they're spending a half-billion dollars if they have no plans to utilize that for additional flights," said Len Kranser, a local observer who says consumer choice is limited by airport restrictions.

Wedge said the airport often faces parking shortages and baggage-claim delays, problems the expansion addresses. Other steps will improve the travel experience, she said, noting plans for Wi-Fi Internet access and new concessions.

The airport faces heavy rushes during popular travel times, and increasing flights would require people to fly at odd hours, Wedge added. "It's like, when do people drive on the freeway? ... You can't ask them to drive on the freeway at 3 in the morning just because it's wide-open out there."

Incensed by airplane noise, activists and Newport Beach officials in 1985 negotiated limits on JWA travel. In 2002, the agreement was amended to allow more flights and passengers.

Travel this year is up 6 percent, and if it keeps that pace, about 10.3 million passengers will go through the airport's gates. That's the maximum allowed annually through 2010, and many locals fear the spike in traffic, coupled with the expansion, will encourage policymakers to revisit the legal agreement's restrictions.

"I think the pressure is on right now to have a look at that agreement. There are many people who would like to see flights going out of there increase," said Evelyn Hart, also an Airfair member.

Annual Orange County air travel will grow to 32 million people in 2030 from roughly 16 million now, said Michael Armstrong, aviation program manager for the Southern California Association of Governments. The spike is driven by tourism as well as white-collar job growth and related business travel, Armstrong said.

Newport remains aggressive in trying to limit airport operations, passing resolutions to bolster Airfair and a coalition of airport-area cities. City Manager Homer Bludau said he expects the legal accord to be honored, but that's little comfort. "We can never rest thinking the issue is going to be resolved," he said. "We always need to be exploring new ways of protecting the community from future expansions."